

# Language Training for Adult Refugees: The Integrate Ireland Experience

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Basic knowledge of the host society's language, history, and institutions is indispensable to integration; enabling immigrants to acquire this basic knowledge is essential to successful integration.

(Council of Europe, Common Basic Principles of Integration, 2001).

## **Introduction**

Living in a new country presents many challenges for adult refugees. Social, legal and cultural norms may differ greatly from those of the country of origin. Tasks such as looking for work, accessing services, even shopping or opening a bank account can be very difficult when you do not know 'how things work'. The initial culture shock and the ongoing stress of surviving in an unfamiliar environment may be augmented by homesickness or trauma from life prior to the move. When the language of the host community is unfamiliar, these challenges intensify. It is difficult for speakers of one language to imagine what it is like to live in an environment where you can understand little or nothing of what is said or written to you or around you, where you cannot express your needs or opinions, and where participation for yourself or your children in the normal life of the community seems difficult or impossible. Without knowledge of the language, access to training and employment is hampered. Research in the United States, a country where immigration is a longstanding phenomenon, shows that employment and earning levels for immigrants are strongly linked to English language ability (Chiswick & Miller, 2002).

While the considerations above demonstrate adult refugees' practical need to learn the language of their new community in order to fully participate in their new environment, these linguistic needs should be situated within the wider

context of language for the adult refugee. In a report on meeting the language needs of refugees in Ireland, Little (2000) identifies two sets of language rights for refugees – stemming from the right to preserve their own language or languages as a central element of identity, and the right to enjoy free access to Irish society which entails the right to develop language proficiency in English. In the design of language provision it is vital that these rights are recognised, and that courses are designed to provide the language needed to participate in the new community, while acknowledging that English is an additional language and is not being learned in order to ‘replace’ the mother tongue.

Learning a language to live in a country where the language is spoken is not a simple matter of attaining an academic understanding of the language. Adults will learn and use a new language where there is a clear need for it – I will be motivated to learn the English needed to talk about my health when I know that my child or myself will be treated by a doctor who only speaks English. Better results can be expected when the texts used and methodology of courses are tailored to the practical communicative needs of participants. Courses should facilitate the development of learner autonomy and motivation with learners taking an active role in the planning of their courses. As language learning is a lifelong process, courses should foster the acquisition of the language learning skills needed to continue learning outside of the classroom and after the course has finished.

Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT) has been developing and delivering courses based on these principles in centres around Ireland for several years. This article provides a brief overview of IILT’s founding principles and provision followed by more detailed accounts of facets of the framework and supports which IILT has developed, with discussion of challenges met in their design and delivery.

### **IILT’s Programme for Adult Learners – Overview**

Participants in IILT’s programme come from a very wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds with 93 different nationalities represented in 2007 (IILT, 2007). Educational backgrounds also vary widely; while some participants hold third level qualifications, others have had little or no formal education. Levels of literacy vary with learners presenting with no literacy in their own language, with literacy in a non-Latin alphabet, and fully literate in the Latin alphabet.

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Note: Integrate Ireland Language and Training Ltd. is a not for profit campus company of Trinity College, Dublin providing English language courses for adult refugees and learning materials for both the adult education and school sectors.

The length of time that learners have lived in Ireland ranges from several years to a few weeks, resulting in different levels of familiarity with Irish life and the English language. All participants in IILT's language courses have legal status which entitles them to work and attend further education/training in Ireland (Stamp 4).

The two principal focuses of IILT's courses are:

- the development of language knowledge and skills to support membership of and integration into Irish society, and
- the identification by participants of immediate language learning needs as well as possible future areas of employment, with appropriate preparation for this objective.

IILT is involved at different stages of language and integration training provision including design and delivery of courses in:

- English for Living and Working in Ireland (FETAC Level 3 and 4)
- Pre-Vocational and Academic English (FETAC Level 5)
- English with Literacy (FETAC Level 1 and 2)

These courses create a framework for language learning at 6 levels spanning the A1 to B2 range on the Council of Europe's Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

English for Living and Working in Ireland is offered at 5 levels up to B1, defined as a level where the language learner 'can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.' (Council of Europe, 2001). Pre-vocational courses concentrating on job seeking and preparation for the mainstream training or the workplace are offered for learners with greater competence in the language (B1 and higher). Academic English courses are available for learners at this level wishing to enter 3rd level education or who need to take exams to ratify their existing qualifications.

A number learners present themselves for classes in IILT with no literacy skills or very low levels of literacy in their mother tongue. To meet their needs, IILT provides specialised English with Literacy classes based on approaches developed by IILT teachers working with learners groups and published in IILT's

resource book for ESOL and Literacy, Feach – Looking at Language and Literacy. On completion of English with Literacy classes, learners progress to English for Living and Working in Ireland courses.

Computer classes are provided as an integral part of IILT's courses wherever possible – with one session per week. Computers and the Internet are used as they are used in daily life – as tools to facilitate communication and gather and exchange information. Classes cover the basic computer skills through tasks such as finding information on public services, researching career and further education opportunities, emailing for information, writing CVs or letters. Certification is offered in FETAC Computer Literacy and ECDL's Equalskills programme.

As motivation is a key factor in successful learning and depends on 'deliberate and conscious commitment by the learner' (Little, 1991, 2007), the focus throughout is on fostering learner autonomy as outlined in Little (2000). Courses are designed to meet learners' expressed needs and to equip them with the skills and knowledge to integrate into their new environment and make the transition to the workplace or mainstream training and education. Each learner defines and refines their career and integration plans and takes responsibility for working towards these goals, regularly recording progress and defining concrete shorter term goals during their progression towards greater familiarity and comfort with the social, cultural, training and work environment in Ireland.

Classes are highly communicative, delivered wholly in English, and draw on an extensive and regularly reviewed and updated bank of resources developed in-house by IILT teachers. Learners are engaged in real-world tasks and contexts from the beginning and classroom activities draw strongly on learners' life experience and aspirations for the future. Language skills are developed naturally through a process of learning by doing. Classes revolve around the topics and learning goals nominated by participants with teachers providing relevant material and exercises. For example, in a class based on the theme of education, learners may find out about the education system in Ireland and tasks could include writing a note to their child's teacher, role playing a parent-teacher meeting, researching available courses, or joining a local library. An integral part of IILT's programme involves bringing the class out into the community through visits to services and institutions of interest, and bringing the community into the classroom with invited speakers from local service providers, former students and 'ordinary people' from all walks of life. Assessment is car-

ried out by participants themselves using the Milestone European Language Portfolio (IILT, 2003), based on the Common European Framework, and formally through FETAC awards.

Courses run year round in 14 IILT centres around Ireland. Provision is on a full-time basis of twenty contact hours per week over four terms. In 2007 a total of 906 learners of 93 different nationalities attended IILT classes throughout Ireland. More than half of all participants were women (55 per cent) although the number of female learners self-removing or interrupting attendance exceeded that of males, reflecting difficulties in sourcing suitable childcare. The length of time needed to learn obviously depends on starting level, the mother tongue, and previous language learning experience and literacy levels, in addition to factors such as the learner's own beliefs and feelings about learning English. Overall, 62 per cent of all learners complete IILT within a year, 86 per cent of all learners will have completed within 16 months. There are learners who take longer to complete. In many of these cases there are literacy difficulties, scant or no formal education, or social factors involved. Outcomes for learners completing in 2007 are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Progression for all participants completing IILT in 2007**

<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Entered Further or Higher Education</i>	<i>Entered Vocational Training</i>	<i>Employed</i>	<i>Job-ready</i>
	105	9	23	48
%	57%	5%	12%	26%

*Access, registration and initial assessment*

Participation in IILT courses is voluntary and open to all holders of Stamp 4. Learners wishing to register are invited to a one to one interview which explores the learners' mid and longer term plans and hopes for their life in Ireland, and allows IILT to collect details and information about previous education, employment and English language learning. Prospective students are then invited to attend a test to identify language learning needs and to facilitate appropriate placement in class. This placement test was developed by IILT to pinpoint learners' language proficiency on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). After testing, learners are offered a place if one is available or placed on a waiting list for classes.

The major barrier to access is availability of childcare. Many learners eligible for IILT classes are parents of young children who do not have a family or social network in Ireland. These learners need childcare in order to attend classes. In many cases the father attends classes while the mother stays at home. Childcare support has been provided to some of IILT's centres as a result of co-ordination between local agencies, resulting in markedly improved attendance of mothers of preschool children. However, the scarcity of childcare places and the expense of private childcare make it impossible for learners to regularly attend courses in many centres, a situation reflected in recent research on the integration of refugees in Ireland (Kinlen, 2008). Inability to access classes means mothers are not learning the language of the community until their children attend school. This in turn means that these mothers will not have the language skills needed to support their child's attendance at an English-speaking school, resulting in difficulties in areas such as liaising with the school or helping with homework, leading to difficulties in the integration of children in the educational system.

#### *Curriculum and classes based on learners' needs for life in Ireland*

IILT's learner-centred approach requires development and implementation of practical activities and supports to ensure that learners are comfortable in a classroom environment which may be very unfamiliar, understand their role and the role of their teacher in their learning, and actively participate in choosing the form which that learning may take. Regular reflection and target setting are essential tools for learners and an integral part of the learning process. This section describes how IILT's courses have developed to meet these requirements.

On all IILT courses, learners and their class teacher discuss how classes will operate and negotiate the course content. Class contracts are created at the beginning of term, providing a forum for learners and teachers to explore their expectations and to formulate an agreement on norms for many aspects of day-to-day classroom life. Early in their course each class holds curriculum negotiation sessions where learners think about the situations they encounter in daily life and will encounter as their career plans progress, and the language skills and other knowledge needed to achieve their goals. Resource packs have been created in IILT to facilitate this process, with picture based procedures for lower level classes. This guided reflection provides the topic areas of interest to each learner. Common examples for learners in English for Living and Working in Ireland classes include Dealing with Officials (form-filling, phoning, the Irish system...), Health (emergency calls, making an appointment, describing symp-

toms, the Irish health system, healthy living...), and Work (career choice, the jobs market in Ireland, CV and interview preparation...). The topic areas nominated and the order in which they are tackled are discussed and then voted on by the class and the outcome is the course curriculum. Naturally, this curriculum continues to evolve as participants reflect on their progress and refine their learning goals.

As the curriculum for each course is decided by the participants, IILT does not have a set ‘course’ at any level. However, as learners share many communicative needs and goals, many themes recur. Table 2 shows the results of a 2006 survey of teachers in IILT on topics frequently proposed by learners at the content negotiation stage of English for Living and Working in Ireland courses, and includes the FETAC modules covered at different levels of the programme.

**Table 2: Topics covered in English for Living and Working in Ireland**

<i>English for Living and Working in Ireland</i> Levels 1 – 3	Introductions Alphabet and numbers My family Accommodation Food People Work Shopping Education Daily routines Health	Learning to learn Transport Time Telephone Personal information Cultural awareness My CV Money and banks Media Dealing with officials Computers
	FETAC Language 3	
<i>English for Living and Working in Ireland</i> Levels 4 – 5	Learning to learn Health Shopping Money and banking Travel and transport Dealing with officials Jobs and careers	CV and interviews Leisure and hobbies Accommodation Telephone Cultural awareness Education and training Media Computers
	FETAC Language 4 FETAC Computer Literacy 3	

Pre-vocational or Academic English courses act as a bridge to mainstream training, employment, or further/higher education, with the topics of study nominated by learners reflecting this (Table 3).

**Table 3: Topics covered on Pre-vocational and Academic Preparation courses**

<i>Pre-vocational</i>	<i>Academic</i>
Career planning	Career planning
Cultural awareness	CAO and applications to colleges
Orientation to training	Education and training in Ireland
Personal identity	Qualifications recognition
The workplace	Study skills
CVs and interviews	IELTS/TOEFL preparation
Telephone	Preparing for interviews
Computers	Computers
FETAC Language 5	FETAC Preparation for Work 3

Pre-vocational courses concentrate on job seeking and preparation for the workplace or further training. Classes use authentic and practical exercises and tasks to the language and ways of the Irish workplace, build confidence and motivate learners to take their next step to a career in Ireland. Academic English courses are aimed at learners wishing to enter third-level education or who need to take exams to ratify their existing qualifications. The programme focuses on language skills necessary for successful integration to higher education and professional life in Ireland in addition to covering interview and application preparation for college entry or qualifications ratification, and preparation for IELTS or TOEFL exams (the commercial ESOL tests used as standards for entry to many centres of higher education or for qualifications ratification).

Regular reflection and target setting are facilitated by in-class use of the Milestone European Language Portfolio (IILT, 2003), weekly in-class reviews with target setting for the following week, and by an individual self-assessment interview at least once a term.

The Milestone European Language Portfolio is one of almost 100 validated models of European Language Portfolios (ELPs) used to facilitate language learning for diverse target groups throughout Europe. The ELP was introduced by the Council of Europe as a tool to support the development of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism, and is designed to motivate learners to extend their skills in other lan-

guages and to provide a means of recording acquisition of linguistic and cultural skills. The ELP itself is a document belonging to the learner. The ELP contains a language biography where learners record their proficiency in all of the languages that they know, how best they learn languages, intercultural experiences, and plans for the future. Practical language and communicative goals are expressed as a series of checklists of 'I can..' statements which learners use to plan and record their progress. The Milestone ELP was developed to specifically address the needs of adult migrants learning language in the host community by an EU Comenius project involving IILT and colleagues working in migrant language teaching in The Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and Finland. The 'I can ..' statements were designed to reflect the situations and challenges meeting adult migrants and cover listening, reading, spoken production and interaction, and writing. Sample statements at this level include 'understand what the doctor/dentist is asking or saying to me provided that he/she speaks clearly and slowly' (listening), 'understand the questions on most official forms' (reading), or 'explain to the teacher/class how I learn best' (spoken interaction). The portfolio also contains a dossier section where examples of work can be kept for future reference.

Each class holds weekly review and target setting sessions where learners gather their week's work, reflect on their progress and define achievements and areas which will need more work. Learners keep a record of their own attendance in the Milestone ELP. The review is supported by extra material designed in house.

Self-assessment interviews take place between individual learners and teachers. Learner and teacher review progress and set new short-term and medium-term learning and integration goals. They discuss how these goals can be achieved and both commit to actions in a defined timeframe which will further the learner's progress inside and outside the classroom. As an example; during the interview the learner may say that she needs to improve her reading. Learner and teacher could agree on short term goals for the learner of joining the local library and borrowing a graded reader, and for the teacher of organising a lesson where the class fill in application forms to join the library followed by a visit to the local library. A report on each self-assessment interview is kept on file by IILT together with end-of-term progress reports.

The learner autonomy focussed approach central to IILT's courses has been developed over several years to its present form. Many learners have not encountered communicative teaching methodologies and a learner centred classroom

dynamic before and may initially feel more comfortable with a more traditional and familiar teacher-centred, grammar-based setting. Learner beliefs based on previous learning experience or assumptions can affect motivation (Lightbown and Spada 2006) and it is therefore vital that learners understand why the communicative approach is used and feel that they have a say in what they learn and how their classes are delivered. IILT's classroom contracts and self assessment interviews have been introduced over the years to respond to this challenge by providing a space for learners to discuss how best they learn and for teachers to explain the rationale for the methodologies used in class. These discussions allow consensus to be reached and reinforce learners' confidence that their reflections and suggestions are valued and used to inform the design and delivery of their courses.

#### *Accreditation and progression*

Accreditation is becoming increasingly important as Ireland's newcomer population expands and employers and educational institutions look for proof of candidates' proficiency. While the Milestone ELP has European currency, it is not yet well-known in Ireland. FETAC provides learners with nationally recognised accreditation and its portfolio based approach to assessment dovetails with the Milestone ELP. Therefore IILT decided in 2004 to supplement the ELP with FETAC accreditation and now provides assessment in ESOL, Computer Literacy, and Preparation for Work as part of its courses. It has been necessary to develop teaching materials and appropriate approaches in-house to meet the demands of FETAC assessment, particularly in the case of the modules originally designed for native speakers of English. Participation rates are very high and the success rates, 100 per cent at Levels 3 and 4 and 98 per cent at Level 5, reflect learners' enthusiasm for FETAC as a means of validating their learning. Although much progress has been made in the assessment and accreditation of language proficiency with self assessment via the ELP and external assessment via FETAC the question of ESOL accreditation at a 'gatekeeping' level for entry to further and higher education or for qualifications ratification remains problematic. Learners have to pay to sit exams based on American, British or Australian English which are not appropriate to an Irish context and place the learner at a disadvantage as the listening tests are based on accents which may be unfamiliar. While IILT provides preparations for these exams in Academic classes as a pragmatic measure, the organisation is currently exploring ways in which a more complete and relevant ESOL accreditation framework could be developed around the FETAC assessments currently available.

Progression planning for adult refugees can be challenging. Many learners are unaware of the possibilities for progression or have expectations that may be very low or high relative to the realities of the Irish work, training, and further or higher education environment, while Irish society may have unrealistic expectations of what is necessary or what can be achieved by adults in terms of language acquisition. Unrealistic expectations among learners often relate to the length of time needed to learn the language and attain employment or training goals. Learners with little or no formal education may believe that they can attain very ambitious educational goals in an unrealistically short time, which can lead to frustration and lack of motivation if these expectations are not managed sensitively. Learners who have worked or attained qualifications in their countries of origin often hope to 'slot in' to the same field in Ireland, and may not be prepared for the need to retrain wholly or partially. Many professional organisations require non-native English speakers seeking qualifications ratification to obtain certification of proficiency in English at levels which require several years of learning the language. For many learners the most realistic option may be to start work at entry level in their field and work towards career progression as their familiarity with Irish working life and proficiency in English grow. Learners need guidance to formulate career plans which take account of all of these factors. IILT centres liaise with local employment and adult career guidance services, inviting representatives in to speak to classes and encouraging learners to use these services. However, IILT's experience has shown there is a need for career guidance from the beginning of language learning. Provision of this advice and guidance falls to the teacher, drawing resources and experience amassed by colleagues over the years. To facilitate this work, IILT teachers have archived this knowledge base on IILT's local homepage, recording progression routes that learners have taken and other relevant information. Career guidance places heavy demands on teachers and on class time, and progression would be better served if a dedicated career guidance teacher could be employed by the organisation. This challenge reflects the wider need for clear progression routes for newcomers to be identified and made available to providers on a national level – while progress has been made in the area of qualifications recognition by Qualifications Recognition Ireland, a resource outlining practical tried and tested progression routes on a national level would be very useful.

### *Social Integration Programme*

Many learners find it difficult to make the first steps to use their newly acquired language in the community. To help learners gain the necessary confidence

IILT's courses are underpinned by a social integration programme which brings learners into contact with life in the community.

This programme includes visits to places of practical and cultural interest – libraries, services providers, local museums, theatres, galleries, and practical trips such as visits to the local post office or supermarket which are invaluable in building learners' confidence. Volunteering can provide a setting for learners to meet and get to know people in their community; visits are arranged to charity shops and organisations to present these possibilities. Learners also visit educational and career planning events of interest locally and nationally – college open days and information sessions, education and employment fairs. IILT classes regularly host visiting speakers from the community including representatives from local services and organisations such as the Garda Síochána, Health Services, and Citizen's Information. Central to the programme are visits from 'ordinary' Irish people from all walks of life, and former students who talk about the paths they have taken after IILT and the careers they have pursued. Over the years, it has been found that the simple, inexpensive, and practical activities of visiting 'real-life' sites and meeting and talking to 'real' local people and former students are most useful for learners as they help to demystify the new environment and show that progress is indeed possible.

*Classroom material created in response to needs of learners*

IILT's flexible curriculum requires material which is relevant, modular, and up to date. Commercially produced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and ESOL material tends to be unsuited to this purpose and does not reflect the needs of learners living in Ireland. Therefore, since IILT's inception, teaching material responding directly to learners' needs has been created in-house.

Some of this material has been incorporated into two resource books, *Anseo – English for Living in Ireland* and *Féach – Looking at Language and Literacy*. Since 2005, newly created material has been uploaded to IILT's website for use by teachers in IILT centres around Ireland, building an extensive bank of material at various levels covering English for Living in Ireland, Pre-vocational and Academic English, Literacy for ESOL Learners, as well as FETAC assessment and support material for ESOL modules and mainstream modules specially tailored to speakers of other languages. Teachers at IILT regularly carry out projects to expand the materials and other resources available to their colleagues in IILT and, via the website, to others working in the sector. Recent and current projects include the creation of:

- a bank of relevant listening material including interviews with individuals (bank officials, service providers, employers, ‘ordinary’ people), and recordings of automated telephone systems and other listening situations that prove challenging to learners of English. Classroom material is created on an ongoing basis to exploit this resource;
- extra material to meet the needs of beginners and learners with literacy needs, including photo essays on classroom methodology to aid teachers;
- a web-based teacher support resource with practical ideas and information on ESOL teaching in an Irish context.

Much of this material is available free on IILT’s website and download figures show that IILT material is used by providers across the country. The range of material allows teachers to pick and mix exercises and activities most relevant to their class, rather than following a standard coursebook which may not meet their learners’ needs. IILT’s current system of distribution of resources via the Internet could be usefully expanded to include material submitted by teachers and tutors from other providers, building a substantial and dynamic online resource for teachers and addressing the shortage of ESOL material relevant to adult migrants in Ireland.

### **Conclusion**

This article has described the approach developed by IILT, and highlighted some of the challenges met in the design and delivery of courses to adult refugees. While language provision is not the whole answer to the challenges of integration, IILT’s experience has shown that courses where learners’ information needs and interests are used to motivate language acquisition serve as valuable aids to newcomers. Key factors in the success of this approach are the motivation and interest generated by learner involvement in the course design, the reflection and target setting supporting learner autonomy, the assessment framework combining self assessment and external assessment, and the creation of relevant modular materials to allow language learning to be embedded in the context of learners’ current and future lives in Ireland. Mention has also been made of issues that have been met in IILT, some of which reflect challenges to the ESOL sector in Ireland as a whole, particularly the need for childcare, defined progression routes, and a means of pooling relevant resources for use by all providers.

Provision of language and integration training to adult newcomers is still a developing field in Ireland. Adult educators in this area have a wonderful chance

to explore, discuss, and formulate best practice to enable the ‘new’ Irish to reach their own language, life and career goals and thus to bring the benefit of their talents and fresh outlook to the community as a whole. It is hoped that this article will help inform the growing body of expertise in the area.

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